

Case study – Communications and conversations

Partnership communication with the rest of the community in Kirk Hallam

There is a diversity of ways in which partnerships can communicate with the wider community about the work of Big Local. This can be by using different communications mechanisms or tools to create dialogue and conversation from newsletters, surveys and consultations to websites and social media activities or more two-way processes/dialogue-based, using social media and/or deliberative forums. In Kirk Hallam, the Big Kirk Hallam partnership have multiple and clear avenues for communicating about the work of Big Local.

Description of the activity

Activity outline

There were (and continue to be) various avenues for communication in Kirk Hallam. This included sharing information through the website, Facebook, Twitter, print and e-newsletters and an email alert; partnership members also distributed leaflets door-to-door; links were established with the local press and radio. They also built interest through specific activities, such as running a competition to decide on a logo that best represented the area's vision for the future. The communications plan early on focused on raising awareness, capturing, sharing and building the community conversation.

Essentially the form of communications and conversations in Big Kirk Hallam emanated from the structure of the partnership and its interaction with the community. After participating in this research, the partnership posted some of their reflections on the Big Kirk Hallam website. They outlined how Big Local in Kirk Hallam is a 'bike wheel' model of engagement. This was first put to them by their Rep at their first meeting:

*'[The Rep was] brandishing a bike wheel and suggesting the **rim** of wider community interest, the **spokes** of people taking the strain of the action and the small **hub** connecting these to moving forward.'*¹

This image has remained with the partnership and they have sought to:

*'...ensure (rim) large numbers know of and feel connected to Big Kirk Hallam through newsletters, website, events etc, drawing on the (spokes) strengths, skills and commitment of those leading on the action by building vibrant partnerships and clear agreements on who is doing what and to what purpose and retaining a committed and connected (hub) partnership with the majority of residents retaining the vision and giving direction.'*²

Those interviewed were very clear that '*...you need a range of ways to get people involved, it's about that recognition of different levels of engagement*'. A healthy model of engagement is '*the interplay of those three elements [of the bike wheel model]*'.

The communication work continues to focus on ensuring residents are kept informed and encouraged to participate, using a variety of methods, appropriate to the different sections of the community. There is a quarterly newsletter which goes out to every household, to communicate what is

¹ <https://bigkirkhallam.wordpress.com/category/communityconversations/>

² <https://bigkirkhallam.wordpress.com/category/communityconversations/>

happening as well as offering ways for residents to get involved. There was a website, a Facebook page and a twitter account – young people are now getting involved in running some of the social media communications. The local newspaper publishes an article about Big Kirk Hallam every six weeks, while the local radio has also supported the promotional activities of the partnership.

Why they chose the activity

Members of the partnership chose a variety of methods in order to be accountable and transparent:



‘To reach everyone, you have to have a printed newsletter through every door about four times a year even if some don’t get read. To be accountable to residents you need face-to-face opportunities through being seen at others’ events and running your own. To share and discuss plans, you need to work with interested groups and bring the findings to a larger event. To keep a record, you need to see the web as both a live communications tool and an archive.’³

Effectiveness

Those interviewed felt that their work around the themes of communications and conversation had been very effective. It was commented that throughout there has been *‘an emphasis on communicating with the community and talking to them about what it is they want, not what the partnership wants’*. Face-to-face interviews and other forms of face-to-face engagement at community festivals were seen as crucial in accessing a wider range of people *‘we wouldn’t necessarily speak to’*.

Using quotes has really helped to engage more people, as one member said: *‘...it’s these first hand experiences that make the story come alive’*. Enabling the partnership and the Big Kirk Hallam activities to tell their story, in essence to be supported to *communicate*, rather than just report, had been very effective.

The nature of **dialogue** between the partnership and community had formed part of a successful element of the engagement process. They have demonstrated to the community that the partnership has listened and responded, and were able to evidence action and change. There was a section on the website where any change achieved was listed with stories which evidenced change.⁴

The What’s Changed section of the website shares and celebrates accounts of activity and change from across the main themes and priorities of the Big Kirk Hallam plan. This has included working with

³ <https://bigkirkhallam.wordpress.com/category/communityconversations/>

⁴ <https://bigkirkhallam.wordpress.com/category/whats-changed/>

children and young people on, for example the Passport project which gives them access to a range of opportunities and activities they would otherwise be unlikely to discover like the Big Camp Out. The Big Camp Out was put on by the two primary schools, organised by a specialist company which erects the tents and organises activities at an event which included a bonfire and lessons for children on how to make safe drinking water and eat bugs.

It was felt that this work had gone particularly well so far and had been '*...the most successful of the activities...with the highest attendance*'. Young people appear to have embraced the activities offered through Big Kirk Hallam; they are '*...fantastic, they have such enthusiasm*'. It was felt part of the reason for this success is that '*...it has been what the kids wanted*'. It is also worth noting here that engaging with young people has significantly helped to increase the number of conversations with adults as well: '*...once we got the kids there the adults came*'. Children and young people have played a vital part in the early phase, contributing to the conversations about the needs in Kirk Hallam, and helping to produce public materials about the profile and creating and running surveys.

Learning (challenges and opportunities)

Challenges

Big Kirk Hallam had experienced some challenges with community engagement, especially at a core or 'active' level. For example it was observed that while the community was often interested in the communications side of activities, wanted to know what the partnership was doing, were willing to attend (certain) events, and were often vocal about congratulating those working on projects, they were less keen on running events or projects directly, or becoming part of the core partnership group. However, the bike model of engagement helped to ensure the different drivers behind people's engagement, and their capacity to get involved, was acknowledged and catered for.

Learning for the Big Local Partnership

Key learning points were highlighted around:

Types of activities – recognising and understanding that everyone is different, diverse activities are needed to respond to this difference to secure successful engagement.

Levels of engagement – to acknowledge that people want to be engaged at different levels, and that not everyone wants or is able to be actively engaged. Providing meaningful opportunities to reflect the desire to be engaged at different levels has helped to create a balanced programme.

Learning and adapting – adapting existing project ideas and methods of communication has helped to ensure engagement in activities and supported the sustainability of the programme.

Patience – to keep reiterating that change takes time, in particular to limit frustration and disappointment when things do not go as planned, or levels of engagement are not as high as the initial aspiration.

Learning for other areas

The interviewees identified the following tips for other Big Local areas:

Persevere, even if it feels like the pace is slow or the levels of engagement are not high enough. To try and make sure you:

‘...don’t get frustrated! Be patient, it will all come together that way, if you are doing what the residents want. Try your best, work hard and don’t give up.’

Take time to adapt – take your time to engage, try to engage with people in a variety of ways, learn from this and then adapt the work or approach accordingly. To make sure that you understand *‘you don’t have to do everything in the beginning, you can build up the engagement.’*

Perceptions – to take a step back and look at the whole. For example, you may feel there are small numbers on the partnership and/or doing some of the ‘core’ work, but, if you look at the bigger picture and change your perception of what you think *should* happen, you will be able to recognise the value is what *is* happening. For instance, when Big Kirk Hallam undertook work with young people, they subsequently had an impact on their family, friends, and the wider community, so larger numbers are engaged and thereby benefiting from the work of Big Local.

The external environment – the capacity of partners should be a key consideration. Both the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector have experienced significant cuts. In practice this means the capacity of these partners to support Big Local activities is substantially compromised. This makes it *‘hard to offer such a range of activities...our projects need more than our little can give them, they need extra’*. Priorities for institutions can also change, related to either national or local policy development. This can mean that the priorities are no longer a mutual fit, so try to be aware of this at the outset and plan.